

The Chaplain writes...*about Christmas customs*

I notice, with a certain amount of trepidation, that it is now past the middle of November. All Saints, All Souls, S. Martin's and now S. Hugh of Lincoln's days have all passed by, and various preparations for the coming extravaganza have remained stubbornly untouched.

Including the writing of our Christmas Letter. Each year, I am tempted to say that I won't do it. Fewer people do, and some of my friends positively hate the custom, which has evolved alongside the Personal Computer, of sending round an Epistle General filled with exciting exploits and colourful photographs of the things that we have been doing since the previous one was consigned to ashes.

And I sympathise with my friends. These letters can become self-congratulatory, though that is not the intention. It's nice to be able to share news with the people one values as friends, even if it is only once a year. If I didn't resort to the computer, I couldn't do even that, I suspect.

So I expect that I shall attempt – over the next couple of weeks – to write a Christmas Letter for 2017 as I have done for the last (I think) twenty years. And I hope that it will not be too self-congratulatory. Sometimes, instead of telling everyone about the more positive exploits of the year, I think it might be better to speak about everything that went wrong! That, at least, would be a good deal more honest – and as most people enjoy a nice bit of *schadenfreude*, I suspect it might be a bit more popular than the usual stuff!

Seriously, however, looking back over the year past is a salutary spiritual exercise. One that we can perhaps legitimately make use of as part of our preparation for Christmas. For all of us, the year now passing will have its moments of joy and sorrow, things that we rejoice about and for which we thank God from the depths of our being. And we shall all have moments of sorrow for the sins we have committed – of omission and commission, to use the old language – things we should have done as well as things we regret

doing. Not that I am suggesting that this provides the material for a Christmas 'round robin'!

If we look back over the past year from a world perspective, there is a similar mix. The repercussions of the extraordinary voting for Brexit in the United Kingdom, and for Trump in the United States continue to be felt. These events happened because of unaddressed *fears*, most of which were unfounded and stirred up by irresponsible and sometimes completely maverick leaders and their counterparts in sections of the media. As a result, we live in a far less secure world than before. Europe – previously in a process of ever deeper union – is now in danger of ever greater disintegration, as other nationalist leaders seek to leave the Union to assert their supposed sovereign independence or rights of self-determination. It is clear, particularly listening to Germany and France, that Europe will suffer the loss of Britain almost as much as Britain will ultimately suffer disastrous and uncharted consequences of the vote to leave, particularly as Teresa May's disunited Government seems completely unable to adopt anything like a sensible negotiating position with the rest of the member states, resorting mostly to the chanting of sacred mantras.

Then there is the Trump phenomenon, which has led us to the highest risk of nuclear war since the Cuban missile crisis in the 1960s, as the President of the most powerful nation in the world trades insults with the President of North Korea, a nation rapidly developing a nuclear arsenal.

Meanwhile, millions of people around the world continue to be obliged to leave homes, livelihoods and even families to attempt to find security somewhere, away from war, persecution, terror and bloodshed. Last year, it appeared that Myanmar was looking towards a more stable, less oppressed future. How wrong was that!

Maybe I should not encourage anyone to look back over the last twelve months.

Though in fact, even when the news is bad, it's an important exercise for us, particularly at this time of year. For despite the fairy-lights, the tinsel and baubles, the sentimental songs, and all the other embellishments of the season, what we celebrate at this time

is the only news that can give us true and lasting *hope* in the face of so much that seems to deny that possibility. We celebrate the Good News of the coming of Jesus the Christ, *not into a perfect world*, but into a *world like ours*. One where there is plenty of sin, where there is oppression and greed, war and terror, and where the poor always suffer most. It was the same kind of world in 3 BC when we believe this Birth took place. Though, thank God, many things have actually improved since then. Generally, though people can and do still act like animals towards one another, there is a greater humanity now than then. And even if we still have not overcome the horrors of war and terror, at least there is a more universal desire and motivation to do something to stop them. Although the European Union is in danger now in a way that it had not been until 2016, it still has ensured peace in our continent for the longest period in history. That was the purpose behind the first moves which led to its formation – to prevent any member nation using resources in war against another member state. In that at least, it has been a complete and unqualified success.

And, *pace* our atheist friends, this was a specifically *Christian* move. A vision of reconciliation and resurrection from the pile of rubble left of so much of Europe after the horrors of 1939-1945. It was committed Christian politicians who had this vision, not just as something nice to try out, but rather as a sacred duty given by God, and empowered by the Risen Christ. It would be interesting to know when *atheism* had enabled so much good. By very definition, belief in nothing can achieve only the same thing – nothing.

In a very short time now, the holy season of Advent will be upon us, preparing the way for our celebration of Christ's birth. It's a season that I believe we all warm to – and maybe that's a good way of experiencing it. I don't just mean the mulled wine and mince pies – though that is part of the warmth! Advent speaks to us of an inextinguishable *hope*. The hope that – no matter what – God is with us and that no matter what befalls us or our world, God assures us that his is the ultimate victory, showing us that and sharing it with us in the resurrection of his Son from death. Our Christian faith is all of a piece. Take out Christ's suffering, dying and rising and there is no point in Christmas, and no true Advent hope. Take out the coming in flesh of God, and there is no lasting purpose or hope

through Easter. Happily, though, it is *all* there – one great mystery, ultimately, of God's loving pursuit of wayward humanity. A hope that God plants in every heart, which we remember through Advent and rejoice in at Christmas.

I wish you all a joyous Advent, and a Christmas which is richly and fully blessed by the Prince of Peace.

Aluc Gordon